

# **Christology: A Brief Essay on the Doctrine of the Person and Work of Second Person of the Godhead**

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**“We believe in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, Son Only-begotten... by whom all things were made; who for our salvation was made flesh, and lived among men, and suffered, and rose again the third day.”**

Eusebius of Caesarea Bishop and historian, reporting the Nicene confession in his post-council letter after the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325 AD, From his post-council letter explaining why he signed the Nicene Creed

## **1. Introduction**

The doctrine of Christ stands at the center of Christian theology. Every major teaching of the faith—creation, revelation, salvation, the church, and the final restoration—ultimately depends on who Jesus Christ is and what He has done. From the earliest days of the church, believers confessed that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God, the promised Messiah, and the only Savior of the world. The New Testament presents Him as fully divine and fully human, the incarnate Word who reveals the Father, accomplishes redemption, and reigns as Lord over all creation.

Because the identity of Christ is foundational to the gospel, the church has always guarded this doctrine with exceptional care. The first ecumenical council at Nicaea in A.D. 325 affirmed that the Son is “true God from true God,” eternally begotten and of the same essence (**ὁμοούσια** - *homoousia*) as the Father. This confession was not a philosophical speculation but a necessary conclusion drawn from Scripture and from the saving work of Christ Himself. Only one who is truly God and truly man can reconcile humanity to God.

Christology, therefore, is not an abstract study but the heart of the Christian faith. It explains why Jesus alone can save, why His life and death are sufficient, and why His resurrection and reign guarantee the hope of believers. A clear understanding of Christ’s person and work provides the foundation for all other doctrines and shapes the life, worship, and mission of the church.

**“If Christ is not fully God, He cannot save. If He is not fully man, He cannot represent us. Christology stands or falls on this truth.”**

*Source: Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), Definition of the Faith — Chalcedon*

## 2. Definition of the Doctrine

**Christology** is the study of the person and work of Jesus Christ—the **promised Messiah** of the Old Testament, identified by the Hebrew title מָשִׁיחַ (Mashiach), meaning “Anointed One.” The New Testament renders this title in Greek as *Χριστός* (**Christos**), from which we get the English word *Christ*. In this sense, the doctrine could be described as a study of the Messiah Himself—a kind of **Messiah-ology**—because “Christ” is both a **title** that identifies Jesus as God’s anointed King and a **function** that describes His saving mission.

Christology therefore examines the one who is both fully divine and fully human: the eternal Son of God who took on true humanity without ceasing to be God, lived a sinless life, died a substitutionary death, rose bodily from the grave, ascended to the Father, and now reigns as Lord and Savior. It explains **who Christ is** and **what He has done** for our salvation.

**“Do not be ashamed of Christ, for He is not ashamed of you.” —**

*Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians — Polycarp*

## 3. Biblical Vocabulary

### Old Testament Titles for the Coming Redeemer

Scripture first reveals the identity of Christ through the titles given to the promised Redeemer in the Old Testament. Chief among these is מָשִׁיחַ (Mashiach), “Anointed One,” the royal and priestly figure set apart by God to deliver His people. Israel longed for this coming Messiah, the one who would establish God’s kingdom and bring salvation to the nations. The prophets also speak of Him as the **Son of Man** in Daniel 7—a heavenly figure who receives everlasting dominion and whose kingdom will never pass away. These Old Testament titles form the foundation for understanding who Jesus would be when He came: the anointed King, the divine Son, and the ruler whose authority extends over all creation.

## New Testament Titles for Jesus the Messiah

The New Testament takes these expectations and reveals their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. He is called **Χριστός** (Christos), the Greek translation of *Mashiach*, identifying Him as the long-awaited Messiah. He is the Son of God, a title that speaks not only of honor but of His divine identity and eternal relationship with the Father. Jesus also refers to Himself as the **Son of Man**, affirming His true humanity while claiming the authority of the Daniel like figure who reigns forever. John presents Him as **Λόγος** (Logos), the eternal Word through whom God is revealed and by whom all things were made. Matthew identifies Him as **Ἐμμανουήλ** (Emmanouēl), “**God with us**,” declaring that in Jesus, God has drawn near in human flesh. The New Testament further calls Him **Κύριος** (Kyrios), “Lord,” the divine title used in the Greek Old Testament for Yahweh Himself, and **Σωτήρ** (Sōtēr), “Savior,” the one who rescues, redeems, and restores. Together, these titles reveal Jesus as both fully God and fully man—the promised Redeemer, the incarnate Lord, and the Savior of the world.

These terms form the biblical foundation for understanding Christ’s identity and mission.

“The devil’s joy is the Christian’s forgetfulness of Christ.” —

*Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures* — **Cyril of Jerusalem**

## 4. The Nature of the Doctrine

### 4.1. The Person of Christ: His Deity and Humanity

Christology begins with the confession that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man. Scripture presents Him as truly divine, sharing the very nature of the Father, and truly human, taking on our nature without sin. The church later summarized this mystery in the doctrine of the **Hypostatic Union**: two complete natures, divine and human, united in one person without confusion, change, division, or separation. This union does not diminish either nature; instead, it reveals the fullness of God’s saving purpose. Christ’s deity ensures that His work has infinite worth, and His humanity ensures that He stands as our true representative. Together, these truths form the foundation of all Christian teaching about who Jesus is.

### 4.2. The Eternal Son: Pre-Existence and Incarnation

Before He took on flesh, the Son existed eternally with the Father. Christology therefore affirms the **pre-existence** of the Son, who is not a created being but the eternal Word through whom all things were made. In the fullness of time, this eternal Son entered human history through the **Incarnation**—the moment when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The incarnation is

not the beginning of the Son but the beginning of ***His human life***. In Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son took on a true human nature, embracing the limitations of humanity while remaining fully divine. This act of divine condescension is the heart of the gospel: God with us, God for us, God in human flesh.

#### 4.3. The Earthly Ministry of Christ: Sinlessness and Atoning Death

During His earthly life, Jesus lived in perfect obedience to the Father, fulfilling the law without fault. His **sinlessness** was not merely moral perfection but the necessary qualification for His saving work. As the spotless Lamb of God, He offered Himself in a **substitutionary atoning death** that satisfies divine justice and reconciles sinners to God. On the cross, Christ bore the penalty of sin, standing in the place of His people and accomplishing what no human effort could achieve. His death is the center of redemptive history—the moment when God’s justice and mercy meet in perfect harmony.

#### 4.4 The Exalted Christ: Resurrection, Ascension, Present Ministry, and Return

Christ’s saving work did not end at the cross. He rose bodily from the grave in the **Resurrection**, demonstrating victory over death and inaugurating the new creation. He then ascended to the Father’s right hand in the **Ascension**, where He reigns in glory. From this exalted position, Christ carries out His **present ministry** as intercessor, advocate, and head of the church, sustaining His people and advancing His kingdom. Christology also looks forward to His **Second Coming**, when He will return in glory to judge the living and the dead, restore all things, and bring His redemptive work to its consummation. The exalted Christ is both the Lord who reigns now and the King who will come again.

“Very God of very God... being of one substance with the Father.”

— *Nicene Creed (AD 325)* — **Nicene Creed**

## 5. Biblical Development

Christology unfolds progressively across the storyline of Scripture as God reveals the identity and mission of His Son. In the **Old Testament**, the coming Redeemer is promised through **types and prophecies**—the seed who will crush the serpent, the servant who suffers for His people, the king who reigns in righteousness, and the one who bears the sins of many. The **Gospels** present the fulfillment of these hopes in the life, teaching, miracles, and identity claims of Jesus, revealing Him as the incarnate Son who brings God’s kingdom near. In **Acts**, the exalted Christ continues His work by pouring out the Spirit and empowering the church’s witness to the ends of the earth. The **Epistles** provide the theological explanation of His person and work, unfolding doctrines such as **justification, union with Christ**, and **reconciliation**. Finally, **Revelation** portrays the risen Lord as the **Lamb who reigns** and the One who will return in glory to judge,

restore, and make all things new. Together, these stages reveal Christ in increasing clarity, from promise to fulfillment, from incarnation to exaltation, from the cross to the consummation of all things.

Christ is the center of the entire biblical story.

**“The one who was crucified is the Lord of glory.” —**

*Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans — Ignatius*

## 6. The Work of Christ

Christ’s saving work is a single, unified mission expressed through several inseparable dimensions. In His **obedience**, Jesus lived a perfect life that fulfilled the law on behalf of His people. Through His **atonement**, He offered Himself as a substitutionary, propitiatory, redemptive, and reconciling sacrifice, bearing the penalty of sin and satisfying the justice of God. His **resurrection** stands as the decisive victory over sin and death, inaugurating the new creation. In the **ascension**, Christ was enthroned at the Father’s right hand as Lord and King, exercising sovereign authority over all things. From that exalted position, He carries out His ongoing **intercession** as our great High Priest, representing His people before the Father and sustaining them by His grace. Christ’s work will reach its consummation at His **return**, when He will renew creation, judge the nations, and bring His redemptive purpose to its final and glorious completion.

**“One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten...  
in two natures, without confusion, change, division,  
or separation.” —**

*Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) — Chalcedon*

## 7. Consequences of the Doctrine

A right understanding of Christ produces clarity, stability, and confidence in the Christian life. It affirms that **salvation rests on a real Savior**—one who is both fully God and fully man—so that His work is sufficient and His mediation effective. It anchors the **gospel** in the finished work of Christ, not in human effort or religious performance.

It shapes **Christian ethics** by rooting obedience in **union with Christ**, the believer’s new identity and power for holy living. It centers **worship** on the person of Christ, directing praise to

the One who reveals the Father and redeems His people. And it grounds **hope** in His resurrection and promised return, assuring believers that the future is secure because the risen Lord reigns and will make all things new.

**“He suffered as man; He conquered as God.” —**

*Augustine, Sermon 263 — Augustine*

## 8. Special Issues and Debates

Orthodox Christian doctrine did not emerge as a pre-assembled system but as the **battle-shaped result** of centuries of conflict in which false teachings were identified, examined, and rejected. What we now call orthodoxy is the faith that remained after the church tested every claim against Scripture and cast aside the errors.

Across the early centuries, this refining process produced a series of doctrinal “battles” that clarified the church’s confession of Christ. Challenges such as **Arianism**, which denied His full deity, and **Docetism**, which denied His true humanity, forced the church to articulate the biblical portrait of the incarnate Son. Later controversies like **Nestorianism**, which divided Christ’s person, and **Eutychianism**, which confused His natures, culminated in the **Council of Chalcedon** (AD 451), affirming one person in two natures. Additional debates over **atonement theories**, the **Historical Jesus** movement, the **exclusivity of Christ** as the only Savior, and the believer’s **union with Christ** further shaped the church’s understanding. The fuller historical and theological details of these controversies are explored in **Essay #11**, where the battle-forged nature of Christian orthodoxy is examined in depth.

**“Every heresy gets Jesus wrong. Every truth begins by getting Him right.”**

*Source: 1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7*

## 9. Conclusion

Christology stands at the center of Christian theology. Every doctrine flows toward Christ or from Christ. To know Him is to know God; to trust Him is to receive salvation; to follow Him is to walk in the life of the Spirit. The church confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord — fully God, fully man, the Savior of the world.

## 10. Epilog: The Distinction Between the Eternal Word and the Historical Jesus

In discussions of Christology, it is common to hear the claim that “Jesus appears throughout the Old Testament.” While this language is often well-intentioned, it is theologically imprecise. Scripture does not present “Jesus” as existing prior to the incarnation. The name *Jesus* refers specifically to the incarnate God-Man, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, born in Bethlehem, and living a true human life in history. As with every human being, His human nature had a definite beginning at conception. The person who bears the name *Jesus* is the eternal Son united with a true human nature in a true hypostatic union; therefore, the human aspect of His person cannot be projected backward into the Old Testament.

What the Old Testament does reveal is the eternal **Word** (the *λόγος*) — the second Person of the Trinity—active in creation, revelation, covenant, and redemption. The Word appears as the divine agent who speaks, commands, delivers, and reveals the Father. The New Testament identifies this eternal Word with the one who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Thus, the Son is eternally existent with the Father, but **Jesus**, as the incarnate God-Man, is not. The incarnation marks the beginning of His human life, not the beginning of His divine person.

Maintaining this distinction safeguards two essential truths. First, it preserves the full reality of the incarnation: the eternal Word truly became man, taking on a human nature that did not previously exist. Second, it protects the integrity of the Old Testament by recognizing that its divine manifestations and appearances reveal the pre-incarnate Word, **not the historical Jesus**. The continuity lies in the identity of the divine Person, not in the presence of the human nature.

For this reason, it is more accurate to say that the **Word** or **Son** is present throughout the Old Testament, while **Jesus** appears in history at the incarnation. This distinction honors both the eternal deity of the Son and the true humanity of Jesus Christ, the one Mediator who entered time for our salvation.

This distinction between the eternal Word and the incarnate Jesus is not a recent proposal but one recognized throughout the history of Christian theology. From the earliest centuries, the church fathers carefully reserved the name *Jesus* for the incarnate life of the Son, while identifying His eternal pre-existence with the **Logos**, the **Word**, or the **Only-Begotten**. This pattern continues through the great theologians of the church, who consistently affirm that the divine person of the Son is eternal, while His human nature—and therefore the historical identity “Jesus”—begins at the incarnation.

Representative voices of this position include Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202), Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373), Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), and in later centuries Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007), Karl Barth (1886–1968), Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), Millard Erickson (b. 1932), and Wayne Grudem (b. 1948). Though differing in style and emphasis, these theologians share the same essential conviction: the **Son** is eternal, but **Jesus**, the incarnate God-Man, begins in time. This distinction safeguards both the full deity of the Son and the true humanity of Jesus Christ.

## **Recommended Reading**

### **For Young Readers and Laypersons**

- Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*
- Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter*
- C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*
- John Stott, *Basic Christianity*

### **For Scholars and Advanced Students**

- Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*
- Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*
- Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study*
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*
- N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*